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John Sedgwick
Major-General

A Biographical Sketch

John Sedgwick

Major-General



Tracy Sedgwick French

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PREFACE

THIS sketch of my brother, General John Sedgwick, was written several years ago for General Thomas W. Hyde, who was at that time proposing to write a more extended life of him, but who became too busy in actual work for his country to accomplish it. General Hyde, whose death has occurred while this sketch is passing through the press, was one of my beloved brother's

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staff officers. My purpose was especially to write of some of the more personal and less generally known incidents of my brother's life.

As some of my friends have wished me to publish it, and especially one, Mr. Carl Stoeckel, who has made it possible for me to preserve it in a printed form as a souvenir to my friends, I herewith dedicate it to him and to them, as a record of a noble life of a man who died for his country.

EMILY SEDGWICK WELCH



MAJOR-GENERAL JOHN SEDGWICK was born in Cornwall, Connecticut, September 13, 1813. He came of good stock, and had the rich inheritance of a noble ancestry. He was of the sixth generation from Major Robert Sedgwick, who was the first progenitor of the family in this country. Robert Sedgwick emigrated from the northern part of England in 1636, and settled in

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Charlestown, Massachusetts, where he held various offices of trust, both civil and military, in the Colony. He represented the liberal Puritans, and was opposed to the prevailing intolerance of the times. In 1655 Cromwell appointed him to an important service in the West Indies, but he soon fell a victim to the climate, and died in Jamaica, May 24, 1656. His family, consisting of three sons, remained in this country. In the third generation from him was Benjamin Sedgwick, who removed to Cornwall Hollow about 1748, and purchased all that "little valley surrounded by natural walls," of which his descendants have always owned a large part. He

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died at the early age of forty-two, leaving six children. His eldest son was General John Sedgwick, who retained the place. The second son was the Honorable Theodore Sedgwick, who settled in Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Both he and his descendants were noted in the political and literary world. Miss Catherine Sedgwick, an author of considerable repute in her time, was his daughter. The eldest son, General John Sedgwick, was the grandfather of General John Sedgwick, the subject of this sketch. He was an officer of some distinction in the Revolutionary war. He was ordered to join his regiment at Ticonderoga in 1775. The first

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night after he left home, his house was burned, the dastardly work, it was supposed, of incendiary Tories. He was called back, and within a week a new frame was raised on the site of the old house, when he rejoined his regiment. This cowardly act so exasperated every loyal man in the vicinity that he worked "with a will," and the urgent necessities of the family were supplied until the house was able to shelter them; and then this was furnished by their generosity, each man bringing his share for the purpose.

General Sedgwick also "huted" with General Washington at Valley Forge during the memorable winter of 1777.

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It has been said of my brother that when, as a young boy, he was asked his name, he would reply, "General John Sedgwick," and this has often been told of him as an evidence of his early martial spirit; but I think it was because he considered the title as a part of his name, always having heard his grandfather called "the General." His entering the army was the result of circumstances rather than from an inherited or natural fondness for the profession. He was never considered in the family as in any way remarkable. He was a robust, manly boy, who could always be trusted—whose word was never questioned—of indomitable will and fiery temper—and one

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who was specially beloved in the family. He was possessed of wonderful magnetic power, which always made him a leader among his young associates, carrying his points by love and fear. He was my special delight and admiration, as he was always my sworn knight and defender in all the combats incident to a family of children. I have heard my mother say that when I was born it was said to him, "Now, John, you have a sister," implying that my elder sister belonged to an older brother, and that he never seemed to lose sight of the fact that I was specially intrusted to his care. My earliest recollections of him are his drawing me to school upon a hand-sled,

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and wheeling me around upon a wheel-barrow, and always tipping my sister over if she usurped my place. I also recollect how my hens' nests were always mysteriously filled with eggs, so that I might triumph over the same sister. These things may seem trivial and even ridiculous, but I mention them to show how intimately we were drawn together in our earliest years. And the bond thus early formed was only strengthened up to the fatal day of May 9, 1864.

Thus quietly and uneventfully passed his childhood. But as he grew into manhood, he became restless and his ambition led him to desire a different life from a

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farmer's. His father, not being able to give him a classical education, which he desired, secured his appointment to the Military Academy at West Point, mainly through the influence of the Honorable Jabez Huntington, who was United States Senator from Connecticut. His preparation to enter the Military Academy must have been limited, for, according to my recollection, he never attended any but our common district school, excepting for a few months at a time an academy in a neighboring town, Sharon, Connecticut, until he was sixteen years of age. He then taught school for two successive winters, and his family thought that his schools were more noted

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for his scholars having a good time than for any literary advancement. During the summer seasons he worked on the farm. After he received his appointment to West Point he attended school for some months preparatory to entering there. He must have been poorly prepared, however, as the examining board told him that it would be of no use for him to remain, as he could never pass the second examination, even if he did the first. But his indomitable will, strong intellect, and cool head did him good service then, as afterwards, and he was graduated in July, 1837, as Second Lieutenant of Artillery, twenty-fourth in a class of fifty.

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He immediately went into active service, and from that time he was always at his post. He first went to Florida in the Seminole War, and in 1838 was with General Scott when the Cherokee Indians were removed across the Mississippi. From there he was ordered to the northern frontier during the Canadian rebellion. In 1846, at the beginning of the Mexican War, he was sent to Texas under General Taylor, and he afterwards served under General Scott. He was at the capture of Vera Cruz, and engaged in all the battles in the valley. He was brevetted a Captain at Cherubusco and a Major at Chapultepec. He commanded his company and was

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distinguished in the attack upon the San Cosmo gate at Mexico City. He was made a full Captain in December, 1848, and assigned to Duncan's Battery, Light Artillery. He commanded this battery until 1855, when he was appointed Major in one of the new regiments of cavalry, and was ordered to Kansas. He remained there during the disturbance between the pro-slavery and free-soil parties until December, 1856, when he obtained a furlough and came to Cornwall, where he remained with us until after the death of our father, early in March. The tie between father and son was unusually strong, and it seemed to us a special mercy of God that he was

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permitted to minister to his father's comfort during the last weary months of his life. It was only two or three days before his father's death that his leave of absence expired. He then immediately returned to his post at Fort Leavenworth.

During the summer of 1857 he had command of a reconnoitering expedition, consisting of four companies, three hundred and twenty strong, with a train of fifty-six mule-wagons. He went up the Arkansas River, six hundred miles across to the South Fork of the Platte, to join Colonel Sumner. They marched over eighteen hundred miles, and suffered innumerable hardships. They had one

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quite severe engagement with the Indians. At one time they were obliged to live twenty days on fresh beef that had been driven over fifteen hundred miles, and without any salt. They were all summer without tents, with but little bedding and few clothes (I copy from his letters). He mentions some sport in killing the buffaloes, which they encountered more than a thousand in a herd. They had a large variety of game, which would have been a great luxury with the accompaniment of salt, butter, or vegetables. He returned to Fort Leavenworth for the winter of 1857 and 1858.

In the summer of 1858 he was ordered to Utah, and, as nearly as

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I can learn from his letters, he spent the time marching and counter-marching between Fort Riley and Fort Laramie, accomplishing about as much as the King of France when

“ With twice ten thousand men
He marched up the hill
And then marched down again.”

The winter of 1859 and 1860 seems to have been divided between the two forts — Riley and Laramie.

Early in the summer of 1860 he had command of an expedition against the Kiowa Indians, which involved much marching and discomfort, without achieving any material results. He mentions one

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slight engagement with the Kiowas, killing two, taking sixteen prisoners, with forty horses, and destroying their plunder. After marching hundreds of miles on their way back, they were ordered to retrace their steps and establish a military post, to be called Fort Wise, in the neighborhood of Pike's Peak. There they had to build their quarters for the winter. He writes, "Such buildings are never seen in the East. No boards, shingles, or floorings or windows are to be used. Thick stone walls laid up in mud, eighteen feet wide and more than a mile long, with dirt roofs, are to be our habitation this winter. The doors will be beef hides, straightened on frames,

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windows the same, to be taken out for light when the weather will permit." He actually spent a large part of the winter in tents. Under date of November 17, 1860, he writes, "The last mail brought a complimentary letter from the Secretary of War extolling our energy and perseverance. I had previously written to Washington that if Providence had not favored us more than the Department, there would have been intense suffering here this winter."

During that campaign he often expressed disgust for the service, and a determination to resign his commission the following spring and spend the remainder of his days at his old home in Cornwall.

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But he was so far away that he did not know of the excitements and mutterings which were agitating the political world at the East—the forerunner of that dreadful conflict which was so soon to burst over the country, and which cost him his life. The firing on Fort Sumter in the spring reverberated even to that distance, and as a man of honor he felt that, educated at his country's expense, he could not desert her in her hour of need. He was soon ordered to the East to take his part in the suppression of the rebellion, and like an old war-horse he straightened himself for the conflict, with what results the different engagements in which he took a com-

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manding part will bear witness. The tale is told in the battles of the Peninsula and Antietam, where he received dangerous wounds and had two horses shot under him, at Fredericksburg, by the phenomenal march to Gettysburg, and in his last campaign under General Grant, in the battle of the Wilderness, when he rallied his disheartened men by the touching appeal, "Follow Uncle John, boys," until the fatal ninth of May, 1864, when he made his crowning sacrifice for his beloved country.

"Duty, stern daughter of the voice of God," was always his watchword. When he heard her voice he was ready to follow. What he was ordered to do, he

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did cheerfully, with the unflinching and unquestioning obedience of a good soldier. And he always exacted a like obedience from his men, which resulted in the perfect discipline and success of the famous old Sixth Corps. During his long term of service he had but three furloughs. He combined great tenderness with great severity of character. He would be moved to tears by a tale of suffering, especially of those he loved. But no quarter would be given to any soldier who was guilty of a mean or dishonorable action, or who dared to disobey his orders.

I cannot refrain from giving some more of the private incidents of his life, as they illustrate some of

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the noble traits of his character. In the year 1852, his father having become somewhat financially embarrassed, and also blind, he generously consented to take the old homestead upon his hands, and from that time his heart always seemed to be there. It was sanctified to him as the place of his birth, and by the toils of his father and his grandfather. No hills or mountains seemed to him so beautiful as those which encircled his own farm, and he was always anticipating the time when he would be able to resign his commission and return to spend the evening of his days in the home he loved so well. He always expressed the desire to be buried among his

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own people. Thank God, that wish was granted him!

Upon taking the homestead, he made every effort in his power to improve it. In the summer of 1858 he made extensive improvements of the house. In the winter of 1859, on the 22d of February, it was burned, and with it the accumulations of years: everything he had sent home from Mexico, a valuable library, and family relics which no money could replace. My mother and I were occupying it at the time, and I can never forget with what anxiety, amounting almost to anguish, I looked forward to the first news from him. It almost seemed as if he might blame me for such a catas-

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trophe, and I was so sordid as to regret the money which had just been expended on the place. But my plummet had not sounded the depths of his noble nature. He at once reassured me, and said, "I am glad that we had done so much for the dear old home," as if it were a sentient being grateful for every dollar that had been expended upon it. He at once applied for a leave of absence, but as he was expected to take command of another expedition the following summer, he could get only thirty days. He declined to accept it, as it would leave him so little time at home. But upon application to the Secretary of War, explaining the circumstances,

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he got leave for six months. He reached Cornwall Hollow early in May, and the following day commenced preparations to rebuild, which resulted in the present house upon the same site, and of the same size, as the home which was burned in 1775. He returned to Fort Riley late in the autumn of 1859. When he departed, his house was enclosed and partly plastered, and it was left in my hands to finish. He never saw it until after the battle of Antietam, when, being badly wounded, he came home to recuperate. After he had looked the place all over, inspecting the stables which had been rebuilt, the grounds which had been graded, and the garden blooming

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with flowers as if to welcome their chief home, I said to him, "Does it please you, John?" He replied, with tears in his eyes, "I should be very ungrateful to you if I were not pleased, but I would gladly give it all up for the dear old home." And that was John Sedgwick, unswerving devotion to the things he once loved. He stayed with me for nearly three months, and it always has been a comfort to me, in the pleasant and stormy days I have passed through since, that as he took me in his arms for his final embrace, he said that the days he had spent with me then had been the happiest of his life.



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